

Conduct and Behavior: A Teleological Distinction in Social Action

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Abstract

This paper proposes an epistemological distinction between the concepts of conduct and behavior, articulated from a teleological perspective of social action. Drawing on the thought of Robert K. Merton, conduct is examined as motivated and elective action, differentiated from behavior as reactive or automated response. The analysis addresses factors that interfere with the rationality of action, including the immediacy of self-interest, the agent's core values, and the notion of self-defeating prophecy.

1 Introduction

The distinction between conduct and behavior represents a central issue in the theory of social action. From a teleological standpoint, conduct is defined as motivated action resulting from deliberate choice among possible alternatives, whereas behavior is conceived as a reactive response lacking explicit intentionality. This differentiation enables a more precise approach to the mechanisms that shape social praxis in structurally complex contexts.

2 Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Teleological Action

Conduct implies intentional orientation, though not necessarily conscious or rational in a strict sense. This conception allows it to be distinguished from behavior, which responds to stimuli without elective mediation. Teleological action does not presuppose an explicit goal but rather a motivated directionality that may be subject to cognitive, normative, or affective interferences.

2.2 Critique of Retrospective Causality

Merton warns against the epistemological risks of reconstructing social actions causally from their outcomes, which may lead to tautological or erroneous explanations. His concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy illustrates how shared beliefs can produce real effects, regardless of their empirical validity.

2.3 Distortions of Rationality

Among the factors that interfere with the rationality of action, Merton identifies:

- **Immediate self-interest:** The pursuit of personal benefit may divert action from its original purpose. Merton revisits Adam Smith's notion of the "invisible hand" to emphasize that individual interest does not automatically ensure collective welfare.
- **Core values:** The realization of certain values may lead to their negation, as illustrated by Weber's analysis of Protestant asceticism, which ultimately undermines its own principles.
- **Self-defeating prophecy:** Fear of a future scenario may induce actions that prevent its emergence, such as the rise of labor organizations in response to Marxist predictions of wealth concentration.

3 Conclusion

The distinction between conduct and behavior, from a teleological perspective, enables a more refined understanding of social action. Merton's work provides conceptual tools to analyze how rationality is affected by structural, cognitive, and symbolic factors. This critical reading contributes to an epistemology of action that acknowledges the complexity of motives and consequences in dynamic social contexts.

References

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